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ABSTRACT

Certain conclusions can be drawn from the fact that both entering school late and being retained in grade have negative effects on children. Children should start school as soon as they are eligible. Retention should be avoided whenever possible. The best alternative to retention in grade seems to be promotion in combination with individual remediation. If nonpromotion is inevitable, an individual education plan that would be most beneficial to the child should be developed. If possible, a transition class should be offered as an option to grade repetition. The Grade Retention and Placement Evaluation project is briefly discussed. The project was designed to research the attitudes, policies, and practices that cause migrant students to be below modal grade, and develop strategies which would address the phenomenon. Also discussed are extra year and transitional programs and late entry into formal schooling. (RH)

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GRADE RETENTION AND PROMOTION:

Considerations for Dropout Prevention

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GRADE RETENTION AND PLACEMENT:

CONSIDERATIONS FOR DROPOUT PREVENTION

by Bob Levy

BACKGROUND:

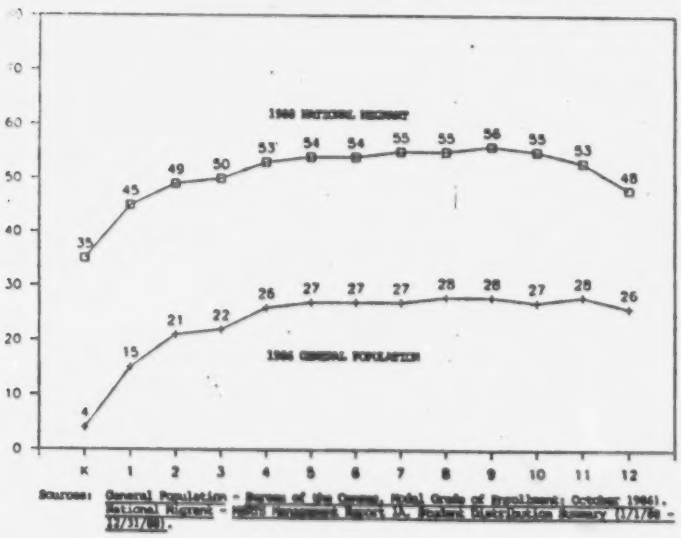
"Youth at risk" and dropout prevention are currently in the forefront of issues confronting today's schools. In the ongoing efforts to examine these phenomena, many studies have been conducted over the past 30 years and similar characteristics and predictors have been shown to be evident in nearly all the research. Most experts agree that the three leading indicators of students at HIGH RISK of dropping out are 1) old for their age group, 2) poor academic achievement, and 3) low socio-economic status.

In examining the causes of the migrant dropout rate, it was found that most students who drop out are older than their classmates who graduate and that there also is a positive correlation between the percentage of students below modal grade (older than their grade level peers) and the respective dropout rate (MAP 1987). This correlation also holds true for the general population of the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 1987; Bureau of Census 1986).

The Grade Retention and Placement Evaluation (GRAPE) project was funded in 1986 - 87 under section 143 of ECIA. Its goals were to research the attitudes, policies and practices that cause migrant students to be below modal grade and to develop strategies which would address this phenomenon. The findings of the GRAPE project confirm the following:

- 35% of migrant kindergarten students are one or more years older than their classmates compared with only 5% of the general population.
- By second grade 49% of migrant students in the nation are below modal grade - compared with 21% of the general population.
- After second grade, the percentage of migrant students below modal grade remains consistently about 25% higher than the national age/grade distribution until about 9th and 10th grades, when they begin dropping out in greater numbers.

% OF POPULATION BELOW MODAL GRADE

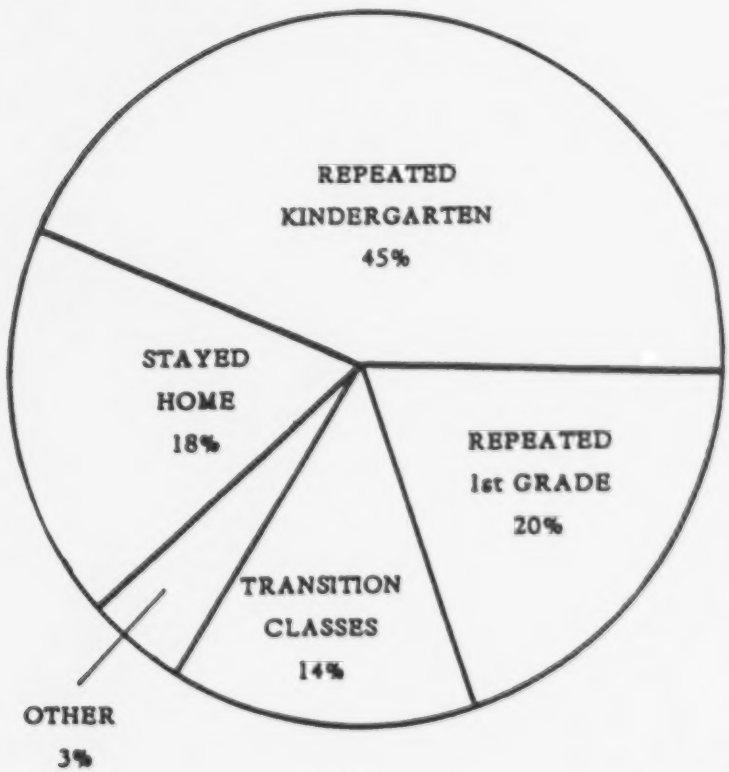


Sources: General Population - Bureau of the Census, Grade of Enrollment: October 1986. National Figures - Migrant Programs Report IV, Student Distribution Summary (1/1/86 - 12/31/86).

FACT: Being retained one grade increases the risk of later dropping out by 40-50%...two grades by 90% (Bachman 1971).

Generally, students are below proper age/grade level for one or more of the following reasons: grade retention (non-promotion), starting school late, and/or inappropriate placement when transferring into a new district. The results of the GRAPE study indicate that the majority (65%) of the sample of overage students were, as suspected, not promoted from either kindergarten or first grade. Fourteen percent of the students were placed in a "transitional" class, (either a pre-kindergarten, developmental kindergarten or pre-first). This "transitional" year is considered a "non-promotion" and will be examined in greater detail later in this discussion. A total of 18% of the sample started school one year later than they could have.

NEW YORK AND FLORIDA STUDENTS
FOUND TO BE BELOW MODAL GRADE



In summary, about one half of the migrant students in the country find themselves behind their peers by second grade (mostly due to retention) and never "catch up". It is then reasonably safe to assume (because being below modal grade is a leading dropout indicator) that it is within this group of students that we will find our potential dropouts. If we wish to keep more of our students in school and ultimately keep them until graduation, then a careful examination of the issue of non-promotion and alternatives to retention is necessary.

RETENTION VS. PROMOTION

The issue of retention vs. promotion has been debated for many years and with the current wave of competency standards and school/student accountability, it is likely that non-promotion will continue to be a common school practice. However, the evidence has consistently shown that retention does not ensure greater achievement and that personal and social maladjustment result. How and why a student learns come about as a result of complex interrelationships of many factors, and simple solutions such as non-promotion cannot address all the intricacies of learning.

Research on the topic of pupil non-promotion has been clear and consistent in its findings since Keyes' 1911 study, which showed that non-promotion is not an aid to pupil achievement or personal development. Holmes and Matthews (1984) believe that those who continue to retain pupils at grade level do so despite cumulative research evidence showing that the potential for negative effects consistently outweigh positive outcomes. Cunningham and Owens (1976) found that merely eliminating social promotion will not solve the problem. Unless special programs are provided, failing students will simply be recycled through programs that were inappropriate for them the first time and may be equally if not more inappropriate and of less interest the second time.

Holmes and Matthews found that the most common method that researchers have utilized to study this issue was to compare and to follow two groups of students with similar characteristics (age, ability, achievement levels, etc.), one group having been retained and the other having been promoted. The effects on students were usually been grouped into five major areas of dependent variables: (a) academic achievement, (b) personal adjustment, (c) self-concept, (d) attitude toward school, and (e) attendance. Using a research strategy called meta-analysis, Holmes and Matthews combined the data from 44 previous studies to examine the effects on 11,000 students...and found that retained students' academic achievement was nearly one-half of a standard deviation BELOW that recorded for similar promoted students .

Dobbs and Neville (1967) matched retained first graders and promoted second graders in a two year study. They noted that the achievement gains in reading and arithmetic were significantly greater for promoted pupils than for the non-promoted pupils. These conclusions were also found by Gaite (1969), Bocks (1977), Street and Leigh (1971), Koons (1977), Sowards and Scobey (1961), and Norton (1983).

Research on the impact of non-promotion on the emotional development of children reveals that retention has detrimental effects on both social and personal adjustment. Studies by Sandin (1944) and Goodlad (1954) reveal that non-promoted children tend to lack confidence and in general are insecure when compared with promoted children. Holmes and Matthews (1984) and Rose et al. (1983) also found that promoted students scored higher on measures of personal adjustment, self-concept and attitude toward school. Curiously, in spite of the negative research findings, the majority of parents and educators still believe that grade repetition is an effective solution for academic failure and social immaturity (Byrnes and Yamamoto, 1984; Shepard and Smith, 1987).

EXTRA YEAR/TRANSITIONAL PROGRAMS

Among the options for providing an extra year for children who are not yet ready for the demands of kindergarten or first grade, four prevail:

1) keeping the child at home another year
2) attending a "developmental" or pre-kindergarten
3) repeating kindergarten
4) attending a pre-first grade

In essence, extra year programs result in repeating a grade, even when the curriculum is altered from one year to the next. Shepard and Smith (1987), while synthesizing research on kindergarten retention found that few studies exist on pre-first or pre-kindergarten programs. However, Gredler (1984) located five studies evaluating "transition" classes and in only one of these (Raygor 1972) found a benefit or achievement gain for children in the transition program. In the four remaining studies, the transition program children were no better off after an extra year than the "potential first grade failures" who were placed in the regular first grade. Bell (1972) found that transition program children had lower self-esteem and lower self-confidence than the at-risk children who were not retained. In Raygor's study the initial benefit of the transition year was negated by third grade (Shepard and Smith 1987).

STARTING LATE...The "Gift of Time" vs. the "Passage of Time"

Many parents are concerned that children who are "developmentally immature" will not be able to "keep up" with their kindergarten classmates. Others are "encouraged" by the school to keep their child at home another year, based on the results of certain screening or readiness tests. However, great caution

should be exercised regarding the results of these tests. Many of the tests being used to evaluate children's readiness were designed for other puposes, such as helping teachers plan instruction. No test available is accurate enough to exclude, screen or place children into "special programs" without a 50 percent error rate.

Shepard and Smith (1987) found that when the youngest children in a grade are compared with their older classmates. they are nearly always less successful yet they state,

> "A major point to be made when we are considering practical rather than statistical significance is that achievement differences between the oldest and the youngest first graders are small, on the order of 7 or 8 percentile points and that this disadvantage disappears and is no longer apparent at the end of second or third grade."

Clemons (1987) suggests that the use of exclusionary tests implies that children should conform to school programs rather than schools adjusting to the needs of children. This reversal of child-centered tradition is very evident in the Gesellian practice that recommends delaying school entrance for children who are "not ready" for kindergarten. The analysis of readiness skills which typifies Gesell testing should be used to note skills which need to be priorities for individual instruction, rather than being the basis for exclusion from school. What is needed is an educational system which addresses children's needs as they enter school, not a testing procedure which excludes children who do not fall within the system's structure.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Since entering school late and being retained both have negative effects on children, certain conclusions can be drawn. Children should start school as soon as they are eligible. retention should be avoided whenever possible. The best alternative to retention seems to be grade promotion in combination with individual remediation. If non-promotion is inevitable, an individual education plan should be determined which would be most beneficial to the child. If the option exists, a "transition class" rather than grade repetition should be provided.

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% of Population Below Grade Level